WRITING LIFE I IN LANGUAGE 2

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ABSTRACT. What is second language acquisition like from the learner's perspective? I examined published autobiographies authored by those who have documented their language learning journeys. One theme that recurred across the texts was Writing; a sub-theme was Writing life 1 in language 2. Some narrativists/learners described the dissonance, while others described the relief they felt when writing about events in a language other than the language in which those events occurred. Insights about writing provided by the learners/narrativists could illuminate both second language acquisition (SLA) theory and SLA pedagogy.

ÉCRIRE LA VIE 1 DANS LA LANGUE 2

RÉSUMÉ. Comment l'apprenant considère-t-il l'acquisition d'une langue seconde? J'ai examiné des autobiographies publiées par des personnes qui ont documenté leur parcours d'apprentissage d'une langue. L'un des thèmes récurrents des textes est l'écriture; un sous-thème étant l'écriture d'une vie dans une autre langue que la langue maternelle. Certains narrateurs/apprenants ont fait état d'une discordance, tandis que d'autres ont exprimé leur soulagement d'écrire sur leur vie dans une langue autre que celle dans laquelle cette dernière s'est produite. Les observations que nous ont fournies les narrateurs/apprenants sur l'écriture pourraient contribuer à enrichir la théorie de l'acquisition d'une langue seconde (SLA) et la pédagogie SLA.

It is unusual for narratives in the form of published autobiographies to serve as data in the field of applied linguistics generally, and in second language acquisition (SLA) in particular, so it was with pleasure that I brought my study, which combined applied linguistics and narrative analysis to the Narrative Matters conference in Fredericton in May 2004. I considered what might be of particular interest to those who use narratives in a range of fields (health, social sciences, anthropology, literature, education, gender studies, and religious studies). I chose to focus on one particular theme that emerged from my doctoral study: writing life 1 in language 2 – that is, writing about one's life in a language that is different from the language in which

the events happened. It is possible, even probable, that narratives in all of the fields mentioned above may be authored by individuals who are writing about themselves in a language other than their first, and that what they write, and how they write, will be shaped as a result of translation. This text elaborates this theme. It is drawn from one chapter of my doctoral thesis entitled Language Learner Narratives: Bridges to Second Language Acquisition Literature and Second Language Acquisition Pedagogy (Steinman, 2004).

What follows is an explanation of how an applied linguist – myself – came to explore published autobiographies as a database. I then summarize the theoretical frameworks that informed the study, followed by my findings with respect to writing. I conclude with a brief mention of how the findings from the narratives are supported (or not) in SLA theory and SLA pedagogy.

How I came to narratives

During my first month of doctoral studies, I came across Kyoko Mori's autobiography Polite Lies (1997) in which the author documented her divorce from her first language (L1) and her embracing of English, her second language (L2). What began as personal reading for me soon morphed into professional reading and professional instruction as I realized that I was learning significant things about language learning from a language learner's perspective. Immersed as I was at the time in the perspectives of SLA researchers and teachers, this third and important voice – that of the language learner - intrigued me. I began a search for other first person accounts authored by those who have crossed languages and crossed cultures. There are, of course, a variety of ways in which the learner perspective may be sought. For example, learners may be asked to write essays on the topic of language and culture crossing, to respond to questionnaires and/or to participate in interviews. While important insights may be gained from such approaches, it is generally the researcher or the teacher who determines the time, the length and the shape of expression. From a critical theory perspective, this top-down direction does not necessarily lead to the most useful data.

This genre I examined has been called language memoirs (Kaplan, 1993); autoethnographies (Belcher & Connor, 2001); testimonios (Beverly, 2000); life histories (Kouritzin, 2000); and, to cite one narrativist in my study, translation therapy (Hoffman, 1989). While these accounts were not limited to language learning events, but were stories of acculturation, numerous references to SLA appeared in the texts that I selected, and it was to these events that I attended in my study.

Crossing disciplines

I was examining one field (applied linguistics) through the lens of another (literary studies) and experienced some dissonance. Interrogating autobiog-

raphy for content rather than form led me to ask myself the question "Who owns autobiography?" Stone offered his insight:

I remain uneasy over the tendency to treat autobiography chiefly as a branch of imaginative literature and thus to stress artistic creation over the equally complex processes of historical recreation, ideological argument, and psychological expression. *Life* is the more inclusive sign – not *Literature* – which deserves to be placed overt the gateway to the house of autobiography. (Stone, 1982, p.19)

The Canadian Modern Language Review published a special issue: Literature and Applied Linguistics: New Perspectives edited by Hanauer (2003). Some powerful points were made in this journal issue with respect to the unnecessary separation of literature and applied linguistics (AL) caused by differences in research paradigms, and a recommendation was made for literature and poetry to be considered "data" in AL. I was further encouraged by this recommendation.

Is there a collective text for those who cross languages and cultures? Do language and culture crossers represent a cultural group themselves? Wong posed the question "Do immigrants of all ethnic groups and all periods share, in some profound sense, a collective American experience?" (1991, p. 146). While each essay and full-length text I examined for this study described unique life stories, there were common threads running through them. Wertsch (2002) examined collective remembering – I asked myself during this study whether the increasingly large body of immigrant autobiographies expressed or perhaps is creating a collective text.

There is support for using autobiographic accounts as data sources in the field of education. Pavlenko described autobiographic narratives as "an intriguing and often disregarded source of evidence about the language learning process. . ." (1998, p. 3), and cited Steiner's (1975) call to consider and submit such memoirs to serious analysis in SLA and bilingual research studies. Eisner suggested that effective research in education should "make aspects of the world vivid and generate a sense of empathy. . . [to] help us to know what it feels like" (1995, p. 5). Similarly, "a singular story. . . will in the magic way of some things apply, connect, resonate, touch a major chord" (Pachter, 1981 as cited in Glesne, 1998, p. 155). Mitchell and Myles suggested that "the findings of SLA research are not generally presented in ways accessible and meaningful to teachers" (1998, p. 31). Narratives offer an "emic" (inside) perspective, which Kouritzin described as "countering the potential imperialism of academic theory" (2000, p. 211). "As researchers in education, we need to discover and rediscover new sources for informing our research activities: lived experiences. . ." (Van Manen, 1990, p. 155). This is true, I believe, for teaching, as well as for research, and for any combination of the two.

Database

Some life histories result from personal interviews. The learner accounts that I analyzed did not. They were neither shaped nor limited by my questions nor my presence – not the content, not the form, not the decision to tell the story at all. The accounts were unprompted allowing, the learners to express, as Schumann (1998) suggested, what is important to the learner, rather than to the researcher.

My database included sixteen texts representing thirty individuals. (Please see Appendix A for a list of the texts that I used.) Reading in and across texts, I marked comments and experiences related to language learning, coding by hand rather than using software, and, at the end of many rounds, I identified six major themes that recurred across texts. These themes then became the units of analysis and each formed a chapter of the thesis.

I examined the work of other SLA researchers who have also worked with written narrative accounts. Levels of researcher involvement in the writing varied, as did the specific issues of interest to researchers. Belcher and Connor (2001) selected multicompetent learners and asked them to write specifically about the strategies they used in becoming successful writers in a second language. Pavlenko worked from existing texts to explore language loss and language gain (1998) and again from existing texts and essays to examine the social context and gender issues particular to language learning (2001a, 2001b). Norton (2000) examined language journals to understand issues of power and opportunities to participate in the second language outside the classroom. Schumann (1998) analysed published autobiographies as well as diaries that he asked students to keep of their language acquisition; his focus was motivation and affect. Bailey examined learner accounts for anxiety and competitiveness (1983; see also Bailey, 1991). Kouritzin (2000) interviewed ESL learners to understand adversities they faced. Tse (1999) examined published autobiographical accounts of 29 Asian Americans in order to explore identity issues. Oxford (1996) analysed learner narratives for insights into learners' uses of learning strategies. My work in this study differed from some of these studies in that I did not participate in the writing of any of the accounts; I entered when the accounts were complete. My work differed from some of these studies in that I was looking for themes related to language acquisition rather than for one specific, pre-determined aspect of language acquisition. A distinct feature of my study was that I sought to link the language related themes to theoretical and research literature on SLA and to second language pedagogy. I identified six major themes that recurred across the narratives:one of the six themes was Writing and I will share what the learners/narrativists had to say on this topic. First, I will summarize the theoretical frameworks that informed my study.

Theoretical perspectives informing this study

Four theoretical frameworks informed me and informed this study: phenomenology; critical theory; sociocultural theory; and a theory of ethnolinguistic identity. My portal into the lives of the learners was their published life histories. I did not enter their actual environments as they acquired their new languages, but I did enter their narrative worlds. I posed the silent question "What was the language learning process like for you?" Phenomenology values the perspective that I sought – the emic (insider) perspective, the "vantage point of the self" (Harper, 2000, p. 27) rather than the observer's perceptions of what was happening.

Critical theory, the consideration and analysis of power or lack thereof, informed this study on two distinct levels. I drew on it to underscore the importance of bringing forward into the SLA dialogue the perspectives of often silent, sometimes marginalized learners. Candlin noted the "consistent anonymising if not the actual eclipsing of the learner... in the relatively short-lived, if intense history of studies in SLA" (2000, p. xiii). A question often asked by those advocating a critical stance is: "Who initiates or drives the discussion?" In this study, the answer was "the learners." While the study was polyvocal (I did add the voices of researchers and of teachers) the learners' issues were foregrounded and learners' issues guided my research and my writing.

Two additional theories emerged as significant as I worked through the database of autobiographies: sociocultural theory (SCT) and Fishman's (1977) theory of ethnolinguistic identity. The narrativists/learners pointed me toward these theories. As Sandelowski advised: "A theory should earn its way into the data" (1993, p. 217). SCT informed this study on two planes: 1) it is relevant to the intention and act of writing one's story, and 2) it provided me with a useful way to understand learners' expressions of co-construction of experience and identity. All events, including language and culture learning are situated – happening to a particular person, at a particular time, in a particular place. The language narratives were rich in providing important information about the contexts and the individual. Agency is a key element in SCT, and agency was an key element in the SLA experiences of the narrativists, both the agency of engagement as well as the agency of resistance (Breen, 2001). What learners brought to the classroom, their histories, very much affected their learning in ways big and small.

With respect to writing in a foreign language, the tension between the agent and the mediating tool (in this study the mediating tool was written language) is considered by Wertsch: "New mediational means transform mediated action" (1998, p. 25). "The introduction of a new mediational means creates a kind of imbalance in the systemic organization of mediated action" (p. 43). Bakhtin (1981) understood language and words in terms of

the tension between language of one's own, and language of the other/alien (1981). The learners/narrativists, when describing the writing of life 1 in language 2, lent credence to the theories of Bakhtin and Wertsch.

Fishman's 1977 theory of ethnolinguistic identity offered three dimensions: paternity, described as granted, genetic, i.e., one's being; patrimony, which refers to one's way of expressing oneself as part of an ethnic group, i.e., one's behaviour; and phenomenology, the sense one makes of one's membership in this group, i.e., one's feelings or interpretations. Fishman addressed which levels are more negotiable than others, and the comments written by the narrativists in this study supported his distinctions.

Method

I am aware that it is unusual to analyze narrative texts without attending to form. I drew on Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber's (1998) 4-celled model for narrative analysis in order to support my approach to the language learning narratives.

FIGURE 1: Four-cell framework

Holistic – Content Holistic – Form

Categorical – Content Categorical – Form

Within this framework, a holistic approach involves interest in all aspects of the life story, whereas a categorical approach seeks to describe a specific subject – language learning, for example. Attending to form involves examining how the story is written, while attending to content focuses on what is happening. Lieblich et al. advised that the cells were guidelines to keep in mind and that strict adherence to one cell may not be desirable. I would classify the analysis of the narratives in my study as categorical-content: categorical (rather than holistic) because it focused on language-related entries specifically and content (rather than form) because what was said to have happened was of greater interest to me than how the language was used.

Riessman recommended making clear the various levels of representation when doing content analysis (1993, p. 10). Riessman's own work involved narratives written up by her as a result of first person interviews with the participants, so the levels of representation she used were somewhat different from those used in my study. I adapted her model to illustrate the levels of representation involved in my study as a whole. This is how the levels of representation looked for my study.

FIGURE 2: Levels of representation

Level 1	Learners	Learners write their narratives
Level 2	Learners	Learner accounts are read and analyzed by researcher
	Researcher	
Level 3	Learners	Learner themes are connected to SLA literature by
	Researcher	researcher
	Theorists	
Level 4	Learners	Learner themes are considered by teachers in light of
	Theorists	SLA literature; pedagogical implications are sought
	Teachers	
	Researcher	
Level 5	Learners	Others read the study and determine its relevance for
	Theorists	themselves and their situations
	Teachers	
	Researcher	
	Others	

It is important to keep in mind that because this was a doctoral thesis and I was working in an academic community, at representation stages 2, 3, and 4, my committee members and other colleagues who (p)reviewed this study affected how the material was finally presented.

I reviewed Ellis and Bochner's levels of "researcher interference" (2000, p. 741), and, in light of their work, I considered the choices made and the research methods used by others who have analysed autobiographical texts (see Chapter 1). At the high end of the scale of interference with (or manipulation of) text are Tse's (1999) extensive coding to analyse identity issues of Asian-American youth and Bell's parsing of lines and words in an examination of text for health and gender issues (1988); at the most holistic end (least interference with text) is Pavlenko's (2001b) approach, which she described as simply noting single sentences or episodes in which gender was mentioned and discussing them in light of theory.

Writing life 1 in language 2

Having made the decision to write their lives, to bring their pasts into their presents in a public way, the narrativists/ learners next faced the decision of which language to use for their life histories. While language narratives may, as Hoffman wrote, serve as "translation therapy" (1989, p. 271), a number of learners noted the tension, complexity, and dissonance of writing in one language about events that had happened in another. Michaels referred

to a language unconnected with the experience as an "alphabet without memory" (1996, p. 101). I will provide direct quotes so that the learners' words, although separated from their texts, are left intact.

Edward Said expressed his thoughts on this complexity: "Everyone lives life in a given language – the basic split in my life was between Arabic and English – trying to produce a narrative of one in the language of the other has been complicated" (1999, p. xi). Eva Hoffman discussed the advantages expressed by certain authors regarding writing in a new language, referring to Samuel Beckett's decision to write in French rather than in English precisely for the advantage of "defamiliarization – exile [from one's language] being, in many cases, an impetus to creativity" (1999, p. 52). Of her own decision to write in English, she reasoned, "Polish is becoming a dead language, the language of the untranslatable past" (1989, p. 120). "I finally choose English. If I'm to write about the present, I have to write in the language of the present, even if it's not the language of the self" (p. 121).

Ariel Dorfman asked himself: "Could my writing in English make sense of this journey of identity into Latin America that was, of course, being carried out primarily in Spanish?" (1998, p. 95). Dorfman described an early fascination with the question of which language to write in. He was intrigued by a chance meeting, at the age of ten, with the writer Thomas Mann. Dorfman was on board a ship travelling to Chile and evidently (and I found this intriguing, given his young age) contemplating his two languages. Upon hearing Mann's heavy accent in English, Dorfman asked his father, "In what language does he write?" (p. 86). Dorfman soon made his own decision; he chose English, "the efficient instrument of my inner kingdom" (p. 86), creating a "dialogue with language that would remain regardless of geography" (p. 84). And he did write in English, even during the periods when he had renounced the American part of himself, spoke no English, and was living a totally Chilean life. Dorfman made peace with the notion of "the divorce, the extrication of the English in which I wrote from the nation where I had learned it" (p. 130). "My writing did not need to be based in any community" (p. 132). He tried to make sense of his distaste for America and everything American at the same time as he was working in English, writing in English, and teaching English. He hated English imperialism, yet "used it [English] to keep bread on the table" (p. 190). This love/hate relationship with English was, and is, not unique to Dorfman. There was more to Dorfman's use of English in his writing: "English was a way of secreting some private part of my past and person away from the overly political world I inhabited. Maybe I needed one unchanging island of identity that, as I transmogrified myself into a Latin American, linked me to the gringo I had once been" (p. 191). Dorfman recognized the contradiction in his writing in English but speaking only in Spanish: "My private English language self and my public gesticulating Spanish persona . . . writing in the language of Richard Nixon and my revolutionary speechifying in the language of Che Guevara" (p. 191). In 1970, he decided to end the contradiction and never again to write in English. He returned to Chile. "Liberated from the foreign, English-language realm in which I had secluded myself for so long. . . I let Spanish flow out of me like it were a river" (p. 245). This self-exile from written English lasted only a few years, and was the only time he stopped writing in English. After Allende's assassination, English made a comeback in Dorfman's life. But it was not until the age of 50 that Dorfman finally made peace with the two languages, allowing them to coexist in his throat. "My two languages call a truce after 40 years of raging for my throat, the two decide to coexist" (p. 270). He ceased being a reluctant bilingual. He now writes easily in both English and Spanish and appreciates the way in which "English made me one kind of writer, one kind of person, and Spanish somebody else" (p. 221).

Julia Alvarez seemed startled by her accent in writing: "I never wrote in another language. English is, in fact, my 'first language' if we are speaking of the book and writing" (Alvarez, as cited in Novacovitch & Shepard, 2000, p. 218). Yet her writing in English echoed Spanish. Her exposure to Spanish seemed to come through into her writing. "But what surprises me, especially since I am now working in another language, is to discover how much of my verbal rhythm, my word choices, my attention to sound, my prose comes from my native language as spoken by la familia" (Alvarez, 1999, p.126). "I don't hear the same rhythms in English as a native speaker does" (p. 173). She heard English in Spanish and Spanish in English (and seemed to write that way as well). Alvarez was also sensitive to the echo of Spanish in the English writing of others. She revealed her "love at first sight" on reading the poetry of William Carlos Williams. Alvarez had not known of the poet's Puerto Rican, Spanish-speaking roots, but intuited them from one line of his poetry. A line in one of his poems, "so much depends," was commented on by Alvarez's (English) poetry teacher as a curious syntactic structure, but Alvarez recognized the structure: "the syntax seemed familiar to me. I had heard a similar expression all my life, todo depende... the Spanish form of 'maybe'" (p. 164).

Greta Nemiroff was surprised by the accents of German in her English writing: "The structures of the language are so embedded in my speech that I am often surprised by the appearance of Germanic sentence structure in the first drafts of my written work" (2000, p. 14). Edwidge Danticat, from Haiti, expressed similar thoughts: "The proverbs of our language peek through the veil of our English sentences" (2000, p. 43).

Natasha Lvovich addressed her writing of her life in English: "The language in which I am writing this book is English – the first time in my multilingual and multicultural life that I can find a healthy, real voice in a language that

has gradually become my own" (1997, p. xiv). She acknowledged that it took not only courage but also nerve to write creatively in a foreign language. She, and other foreign writers who write in English, do so "to be heard and to be read, to be free" (p. xv). Lvovich took a critical stance towards her goals in writing.

Kyoko Mori appeared quite happy to write her life 1 (which happened in Japanese) in her language 2 (English). "Language is like a radio. I have to choose a specific station, English or Japanese, and tune in. I can't listen to both at the same time. In between there is nothing but static" (1997, p. 17). Mori felt more herself in English – the self she would like to be – and therefore expressed no quandary or discomfort about writing her Japanese life in English. She refused, as was her mother's wish, to write "polite lies," as she would have had to do in Japanese.

Certain individuals who wrote in their L2 experienced pressure not only from members of the L2 community who seemed to regard them forever as less than competent writers, but also from those in their L1 communities who felt that the writer had "sold out" by writing in English. They were thus disconnected from one or the other, or sometimes, both of their writing communities. For example, Alvarez was told that, "It doesn't seem possible that a Dominican should write in English. Come back to your country – to your language. You are a Dominican" (1999, p. 171). Alvarez expressed her own (non)sense of place as a writer: "I'm not a Dominican writer . . . I'm also not a norteamericano writer . . . I am a Dominican American writer" (p. 173); "I am a Vermont writer from the Dominican" (p. 187). Alvarez chafed at this responsibility, at this expectation from her L1 community and expressed the hope that the duality in her writing would become a "new place on the map . . . a synthesizing way of looking at the world. I'm mapping a country that's not on the map, and that's why I'm trying to put it down on paper" (p. 173). Alvarez hoped to create a new perspective that was not English and not Spanish. Alvarez rejected "simple labels, simplistic choices" (p. 68) that did not reflect the totality of her identity and her experiences. In writing as a Latina and as a woman writing in English, she resolved to "write stories and poems using the metaphors, details, rhythms of that first world I had left behind in Spanish. A multicultural perspective is more and more the way to understand the world" (p. 173).

Connection to SLA theory and bedagogy

My first research question – the one that drove the study and guided my reading and writing was: "How do these learners represent their second language acquisition?" I have focused in this present article on the understandings that emerged from the first question and on one of the themes: Writing life 1 in language 2. Research questions 2 and 3 focused on whether SLA research and SLA pedagogy acknowledged the issues named as significant by the

learners. I will comment briefly on what I found in the research literature and what teachers had to say.

The theoretical literature in SLA that I examined did not address writing life 1 in language 2 in the way that the learners did, although I did find acknowledgement of this tension in some literature on the periphery of SLA for example, Bammer (1994); Coulmas (1997); and Wisse (2000). Much of SLA research and literature seems to attend to the dance rather than to the dancer (to re-word a line from Yeats) – i.e., to the language rather than to the language speaker. Included in the SLA literature that I examined were five texts commonly used as course texts in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) preparation programs. The complexity of writing in a "language without memory" was not addressed in any of these texts.

I invited six experienced English as a second language (ESL) teachers to meet in focus group sessions to determine whether they recognized the issues named as significant by the learners, and if so, whether they saw any pedagogical implications. We considered carefully the notion that writing in a language about events that happened in another language may lead to tension – that identity is at much at play as is ability. We began to wonder whether the common practice of beginning a writing course by having students write about their early lives, which had happened in another language, should be reconsidered. We agreed that excerpts from the texts would serve as useful prompts in the ESL classroom to encourage students to express their own literacy across languages and that excerpts would also be useful in teacher education.

Concluding remarks

Learners, researchers, and teachers each have a different stake in and take on SLA, but have much to offer one another. Those working on theory related to SLA and teachers working with language learners need to carve a space in their studies and in their practice for learner perspectives — including feelings about writing in an alphabet without memory.

There has been a recent surge of energy in cross-cultural writing. Bromley (2000) investigated 'borderline' cultural fictions of the diaspora. Bromley used 'borderline' to locate the cultural positions of the writer. I also read 'borderline' here as modifying the noun 'fiction' because many of the contributors use much that is autobiography. Weber, in an issue of *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2004, B8-B10) addressed young, new immigrant writers who are documenting their arrival stories (ex. Shteyngart, 2002; Bezmozgis, 2004; and Vapnyar, 2003). In addition, a just-released anthology, *The Genius of Language: Fifteen Writers Reflect on Their Mother Tongues*, highlighted fifteen writers who described their experiences with tongues not their own (Lesser, 2004). Some of the authors of the narratives in my corpus are represented in

this anthology. Much is expressed about the feelings that lie behind writing in a foreign language.

I conclude this paper with a quote from Aciman, taken from the introduction to his anthology, *Letters of Transit* (1999). It relates to an accent in writing, a phenomenon he noted when reading the works of those included in his anthology:

Some of the writers still make out traces of an accent in their own prose, call it a particular cadence in a language that is never quite just English, but not anything else either. An accent is the tell-tale scar left by the unfinished struggle to acquire a new language. But it is much more. An accent marks the lag between two cultures, two languages, the space where you let go of one identity, invent another, and end up being more than one person but never quite two. (1999, p.11)

In this study, for me, the learners were the teachers; their narratives were the curriculum.

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APPENDIX A

Principal Narratives

A Border Passage Ahmed, Leila (1999)

Something to Declare Alvarez, Julia (1999)

Heading South, Looking North Dorfman, Ariel (1998)

Lost in Translation Hoffman, Eva (1989).

Hunger of Memory Rodriguez, Richard (1982)

Out of Place Said, Edward (1999)

Support Narratives

Letters of Transit Aciman, André (1999)

The Promised Land Antin, Mary (1997, orig. 1912)

Reflections on Multiliterate Lives * Belcher, Diane and Connor, Ulla (Eds.) (2001)

Becoming American * Danguah, Meri-Nana-Ama (Ed.) (2000)

French Lessons Kaplan, Alice (1993)

The Multilingual Self Lvovich, Natasha (1997)

Polite Lies Mori, Kyoko (1997)

Writing Life 1 in Language 2

Onna Rashiku (Like a Woman)	Ogulnik, Karen (1998)
Language Crossings *	Ogulnik, Karen (Ed). (2000)
When I was Puerto Rican	Santiago, Esmeralda (1993)

^{*}anthologies

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